

Reading Toolkit: Grade 8 Objective 3.A.8.a

Standard 3.0 Comprehension of Literary Text

Topic A. Comprehension of Literary Text

Indicator 8. Read critically to evaluate literary texts

Objective a. Analyze and evaluate the plausibility of the plot and the credibility of the characters

Assessment Limits:

Connections among the events in the plot, the actions of the characters, and the plausibility of the conflict and/or outcome

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Plausibility of characterization

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Lesson Seeds

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Activities

Prior to this activity, the teacher should select a literary text where a human character has special abilities. Some authors to explore for this type of text are Robin McKinley, Patricia Wrede, Ursula LeGuin, Roald Dahl, Susan Cooper, Lloyd Alexander, Natalie Babbitt, J.K. Rowling etc...Read aloud to students or have students read this type of literary text silently. Once reading is completed, the teacher and students should discuss the varied qualities and actions of this human character with special abilities dividing the qualities and actions into those that are believable and grounded in reality and those that are unbelievable and grounded in fantasy. The discussion should evolve into why certain qualities and actions are believable and others are unbelievable. This activity can extend to settings, plot developments, etc...any literary element the text would yield that addresses believability. Fantasy as well as science fiction texts work well with this activity.

As students read a realistic or historical fiction passage, the teacher should select a particular point where students make predictions about the future actions of a character. Students should offer ideas about what characters might say, do, or think next and support each idea by the text and by how realistic or believable that speech, action, or thought might be. The teacher should record each suggestion on the board or overhead. Students should return to the text and read to a designated point where the characters' predicted speech, thoughts, or actions are confirmed or refuted. Then the students and teacher should compare student suggestions to the text discussing how believable the text is in comparison to student suggestions.

Prior to class instruction, the teacher should read the text to determine a conflict in a realistic or historical fiction text. To establish a base for discussion, the teacher should tell students details of the text conflict but not its resolution. Students should be placed in small groups and given time to act out the conflict and their suggested resolution to that conflict. Each group should present its dramatic suggestion to the rest of the class and conclude with an explanation about how its suggested conclusion is realistic and based upon text details provided by the teacher. Next, students should silently read the text. Once reading is complete, the teacher and students should compare the text conflict resolution to the resolutions offered by the students. Then the teacher should place students into four or five small groups. Each group should have a focus to analyze the text: setting, characters, conflict, resolution, and subplots if the text contains subplots. Each group of students should review the text from its designated text element determining how well that element supports the believability/plausibility of the text conflict and resolution. The activity can conclude with each group reporting on the conclusions drawn by its members or by creating new small groups in jigsaw fashion where at least one member of the new group represents one of the text elements for discussion.

Prior to this activity, the teacher should select a science fiction/fantasy text where there is a predominant literary element that is grounded in science fiction or fantasy. Some suggestions are Lois Lowry's *Gathering Blue* (setting) or *The Messenger* (setting), Isaac Asimov's "Rain, Rain, Go Away" (character) or Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day" (setting), or David Almond's *Skellig* (character). With the teacher, students should read the text or a portion of the text and complete an organizer where students record elements they liked and disliked about the text and the elements that stretched their believability. After the less believable elements have been identified, the teacher and students should discuss

how the author made these elements seem plausible within the context of the story. For example, in the case of character, what do other characters say about or how do they react to the character in question? Regarding setting, how does the author use language or have characters move within or react to the setting? Students may draw their own text-based conclusions about how successful the author is in making elements seem plausible. To conclude the activity, the teacher might want to institute a modified "Four Corners" activity, where students register the degree of their believability in identified story elements by grouping together with those who believe an element is believable, unbelievable, or partially believable. Extension: For skilled students, completing this activity with a piece of realistic fiction like Angela Johnson's *Heaven* increases the level of cognitive demand.

Clarification

Reading Grade 8 Indicator 3.A.8

To show proficiency of critical evaluation of literary texts, a reader must form a number of judgments about a text. To begin this process a critical reader must read a text purposefully and focus thoughts on the interaction of literary elements within the text. During and after reading, the evaluation of the text requires a reader to determine the role of the literary elements, the relationship between the text and its historical, social, or political context, and the relationship between the structure of the text and its purpose. A full critical evaluation of a literary text requires attention to each of these components.

When a reader approaches a text critically, that reader is reading or listening to that text with a definite purpose and bringing to that text any prior knowledge that he or she may have. Knowing how one story is structured helps a reader understand each new story. Beginning at early stages to determine what story plot or characters are real or believable and what story plot or characters are fantasy establishes a groundwork for the more difficult determination of what plot and characters are plausible where people and events appear to be true or reasonable but often are not so. An analysis of a plot's plausibility begins with an identification of each element of a plot: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. A reader must decide whether each individual element is the business of everyday life or if the element is fanciful or futuristic. Once judgments about the plot elements are established, a reader needs to focus on characters. Given the background of the plot in which the character must act, a reader must analyze the character, determining whether the character's appearance, speech, and actions fit the plot. If the character does fit, the whole of the story will appear reasonable and true. If the character or an element of the plot stands out from or is in contrast to the whole of the story, the story will lose its believability.

A critical reader should be able to extend thinking from the text. At early stages after reading a text, a reader should review the plot and decide what plot or character details are incomplete and form a logical question about that character or plot development. Or given incomplete plot or character details, a critical reader should be able to make a logical prediction about furthering the plot or determining a realistic course of action or a change of beliefs for a character. A critical reader could expand upon a prediction and explain how, if that prediction were to occur, it would affect the plot and characters. A more sophisticated critical reader might query whether the author purposefully left unanswered questions about plot and character development to engage a reader. To that end, a text might contain ambiguities, subtleties, and contradictions.

- Ambiguity—the possibility of one or more correct interpretations of a plot development or character speech
- Subtlety—the not-so-apparent difficult-to-perceive shift in a plot or development of a character that gives rise to discussion and interpretation
- Contradiction—a shift of plot which belies all previous plot movements or a development of character which appears to be in direct conflict with how that character has been established

To fully appreciate historical fiction, a critical reader must be aware that certain elements of plot and certain characters are true historically while others are fictional. Fictional characters and events can be written and developed to appear plausible and can serve as a realistic backdrop for true historical events and characters or the reverse can be true. The historical characters and events can serve as a backdrop for the fictional characters and

events thereby making what is fictional appear more believable. Creating characters and events that are true to their historical context gives a critical reader a full picture of an historical time period.

The social context of a literary work addresses the social roles of characters based upon the time period of the work. Those issues may concern gender, race, or socio-economic status and will reflect the bias of that time period. These social issues may impact character development and motivation and plot development. Creating characters and events that are true to the social context of a literary work's time period create plausibility and give a reader a broader picture of a time period.

The political context of a literary work addresses how a society chooses its leaders, how rules are made and enforced and how governmental processes or decisions impact daily life. Just as political processes affect the lives of real-life citizens so do these processes when featured in a literary work affect the plot development of stories and the lives of fictional citizens.

When a story is crafted that attends to the historical setting and the social and political context of a time period, a plausible re-creation of that period is presented. A critical reader receives a fully developed picture of that time with characters who respond believably within the parameters of the story. To a critical reader, themes developed in such literary works comment upon the prevailing social and political standards of that time period and invite comparison to contemporary issues.

The structure of a literary work refers to its literary form. At its simplest a difference in literary form can be the difference between prose and poetry. As structure becomes more complex it can address different forms of poetry like limerick, couplet, sonnet, etc... or the difference in prose structures which can refer to the use of flashback, foreshadowing, journal entries versus chapters, sentence structure, etc... For each literary work, an author has a purpose; it can be as general as entertainment to as specific as pointing out a social injustice. For a critical reader to analyze the relationship between the structure of a literary work to its purpose, a critical reader must first read carefully to determine the author's purpose. Next, a reader will identify the structure of a literary work as specifically as is possible. Finally, a critical reader can determine whether the structure of a literary work best showcases the author's purpose and be able to explain why that structure works for that purpose.